

Volume 6 – No. 18
April 13 - 20, 2010

Health & Travel security Insights from around the five continents

North & Central America

April 13

United States – FDA concerned with safety of antibacterial chemical: The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced that the agency will be conducting a safety review of triclosan, a chemical found in many federally-regulated antibacterial soaps, hand sanitizers, body wash, toothpaste, cosmetics, deodorant, and even clothing and toys. Recent scientific studies have raised "valid concerns" over the safety of the chemical, with animal studies showing triclosan's potential to affect the thyroid hormone and estrogen levels, as well as lead to antibiotic resistance and a lessened ability to treat infection. Studies have shown that the chemical is so prevalent that it is found in the urine of 75 percent of the population. Triclosan has been registered as a pesticide by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) since 1969 and is often added to consumer products to slow or stop the growth of bacteria, fungi, and viruses. In 2005, a federal advisory panel to the FDA concluded that there is no evidence that triclosan in antibacterial soap and body wash provides any additional benefit, as compared with regular soap and water.

United States – Radiation monitor was not working: A radiation monitoring device at the Oyster Creek nuclear plant was found during routine maintenance to be not functioning, according to Nuclear Regulatory Commission records. An NRC report states that during the routine replacement of the stack sample flow transmitter, plant technicians discovered the stack sample line had become separated. The sample line was reconnected, and a visible count change was observed. At the time of discovery, the stack radioactive gas effluent monitoring system had been removed from service in accordance with the plant procedures and declared inoperable for performance of a surveillance procedure.

April 16

United States – Lyme disease: Utah is investigating almost 50 cases of possible Lyme disease over a 14-month period. Although common in New England and in states such as Delaware, Maryland and Wisconsin, Lyme disease is rare in Utah, with no more than 5 to 7 cases a year, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Transmitted by tick bites, it causes flu-like symptoms. It's treatable with antibiotics, but undetected, it can spread to joints, the heart and nervous system.

April 17

Canada – Terrorism alert in Alberta: According to reports, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police force (RCMP) is investigating a threatening letter that warns of more attacks on EnCana Corp. gas pipelines in northeast British Columbia. Since October 2008, there have been six bombings of EnCana pipelines near Dawson Creek, British Columbia, which is located approximately 370 mi/600 km northwest of Edmonton, Alberta.

South America

April 13

Brazil – Forged vaccines: Agents of the National Agency for Sanitary Surveillance (Anvisa) and of the Federal Police (FP) apprehended forged vaccines, among them against Influenza IT (H1N1), in a drugstore of the city of Dom Cavati, in the region of the city mining of Governor Valadares (MG). The owner and the pharmacist responsible for the establishment were imprisoned.

April 14

Brazil – Dengue fever cases: The Ministry of Health of the Federal District reveals that dengue continues in expansion. To date, 7,475 cases of dengue were reported in the entire DF, 965 to more since the week pace. They were already confirmed 3,478 cases of the disease.

El Salvador – Dengue fever cases: The Salvadorian Public Health and Social Assistance Ministry said that confirmed dengue cases in the country rose to 3,633 last week. The number of classic dengue cases stood at 3,566 and the cases of hemorrhagic dengue 67, the ministry added.

Honduras – Troops deployed: The government made announcements regarding its decision to send more than 2,000 military and police personnel to the lower Aguán River Valley region to seize drugs and illegal weapons, as well as to deploy troops to unconfirmed locations to assist the police in combating violent crime. The announcements came after suspected drug gang members late on 10 April killed nine people in the Comayagüela area of the capital Tegucigalpa. The gunmen allegedly broke into and attacked at least two houses and opened fire on the streets of Arnulfo Cantarero Lopez neighborhood. The authorities suspect the incident to be a result of gang rivalry over drug trafficking routes.

Europe

April 13

Malta – Increased security: Security will be heightened on 17-18 April for a visit to the country by Pope Benedict XVI, the leader of the Catholic Church. The authorities have expressed concerns that protests will disrupt the papal visit due to an ongoing scandal over sexual abuse involving the country's Roman Catholic clergy; victims have stated their intention to protest during the pope's arrival on 18 April at Malta International Airport (MLA), located approximately three miles (5km) south-west of the capital Valletta, as well as to stage demonstrations at various other locations during his 36-hour visit.

April 14

Germany – Air traffic controllers to strike: The Gewerkschaft der Flugsicherung (GdF) union, which represents air traffic controllers threatened to launch an industrial action following failed labor negotiations with the air traffic authority, Deutsche Flugsicherung (DFS). While no dates have been announced for the commencement or duration of the work stoppage, the union indicated that it may begin by 19 April; GdF representatives said they would provide 24 hours notice before beginning any strike.

United Kingdom – Doctors warn of disease epidemic: Preventable diseases such as obesity and tooth decay among children are reaching epidemic levels, doctors in Liverpool warned. Medical staff from Alder Hey children's hospital said the huge growth in the number of avoidable health complaints could lead to a generation dying before their parents. Staff said there had been a considerable increase in the amount of time spent dealing with avoidable conditions.

April 14

Spain – Airline suspends service: Andalus Lineas Aereas (EA), based in Malaga, Spain, suspended all operations and flight services indefinitely as of April 12 due to its dire financial situation, which will likely force the airline to begin bankruptcy proceedings. As of April 13, EA, which operated a few flights between Spain and North Africa, has not stated if and how it would reimburse passengers for invalid tickets. EA's service suspension has removed the only direct flights between Madrid (MAD) and Gibraltar (GIB) airports. Contact Andalus Lineas Aereas to determine how your booked flight can be serviced and how to obtain a refund.

April 15

Iceland – Volcano causing flight problems: A volcano under a glacier in Iceland has erupted for the second time in less than a month, melting ice, spewing smoke and steam, closing a major road and forcing hundreds of people to flee rising floodwaters. Authorities evacuated 800 residents from around the Eyjafjallajokull glacier as water gushed down the mountainside and rivers rose by up to 10 feet (3 meters). Iceland's main coastal ring road was closed near the volcano, and workers smashed holes in the highway in three spots in a bid to give the rushing water a clear route to the coast and prevent bridges from being swept away. There continues to be a major chance of flooding in the region. Flights in and out of northern Europe have been disrupted for days. In the northern UK many airlines announced flight cancellation until the large cloud of ash moves away from the major flight path between North America and the European continent. All air passengers traveling to or from Scandinavia, Britain, Germany, France and the Low countries should check with their serving airline to ensure their flight is still scheduled and departing on time.

Russia – Air traffic controller hunger strike: A partial hunger strike being staged by air traffic controllers in various areas of Russia expanded on 13 April 2010, with controllers from the Urals region joining the action. The hunger strike began on April 9 to protest contract changes. Currently, controllers in Ekaterinburg, Nizhnevartovsk, Surgut, Kogalym, Tarko-Sale, Khanty-Mansiysk, Nadym, Tyumen and 14 other cities are participating. There are concerns that if the action continues for an extended period of time, it could impact safety.

Krakow: Protests mount over presidential burial: Hundreds, if not thousands of people have taken to the streets of Krakow to protest the planned burial of the late president Kaczynski and his wife in the cathedral in the city. Kaczynski and other senior members of Poland's political and religious elite were killed in a plane crash on April 10. The protesters claim that Kaczynski should not be buried with Poland's national heroes and kings.

April 16

Germany – Frankfurt Airport closed: German airport authorities closed both Frankfurt am Main Airport (EDDF/FRA) and Dusseldorf International Airport (EDDL/DUS) on 16 April because of the deteriorating air conditions; airports in Hamburg, Berlin, Bremen, Bonn and Hanover were closed the previous day. The volcanic eruption in Iceland is continuing to spew large amounts of ash into the atmosphere, and the plume is drifting eastward toward Russia. Air space closures and disruptions are expected to continue into the 17-18 April weekend, and it is not known when conditions will improve enough to resume flights.

April 17

Estonia – NATO meeting to cause travel disruptions: All travelers should be reminded of heightened border controls, road closures and identification checks during the period of April 17-23, 2010. During this time Tallinn will host a meeting of NATO foreign ministers and a variety of related events. During this period a number of high-level visitors will arrive in Estonia, including U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton. Return to Pre-Schengen Agreement Border Controls: From April 17-23, entrance through all land, sea and air borders will require a passport check.

April 17 – Estonia – continued:

This includes the Tallinn ferry port and road crossings from Latvia. Road Closures: Estonian police will be closing numerous roads in Tallinn during this week, especially on April 22 and 23. In particular, roads near the Radisson, Swissotel and Olympia hotels, Toompea hill, Parnu, Narva and Estonia streets southeast of the Old Town and Tartu street between the airport and the central city. Carry identification at all times.

Middle East & Asia / Pacific

April 14

China – Strong earthquake: An earthquake measuring 6.9 on the moment magnitude scale, as registered by the US Geological Survey (USGS), struck Yushu county (Qinghai province) at around 07.49 (local time). At least 300 people have been killed and thousands more injured. Approximately 85 percent of buildings in the county capital Jyeku have collapsed. The USGS has recorded at least three aftershocks, one with a magnitude of 5.8. The Chinese Earthquake Networks Centre (CENC) has registered the strength of the temblor as 7.1. Telecommunication networks have reportedly been affected. The casualty toll is likely to increase as rescue teams reach the affected locations. They may also exacerbate disruption to essential services. Furthermore, overland travel in the county is likely to be difficult, as fallen debris may have blocked roads, and the influx of personnel and resources for relief and rescue operations should be expected increasing congestion.

Egypt – Israeli government warning: The Israeli government issued a warning advising its citizens visiting the Sinai Peninsula to immediately leave the region. The warning was issued following intelligence received on the possible abduction of Israeli nationals in the peninsula, particularly along the Red Sea coast.

India – Opposition rally: Supporters of the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on 21 April will stage a protest in the capital Delhi. Participants will march from the Ramlila Ground, on Asaf Ali Road near Chandni Chowk, to the parliament building in Sansad Bhavan. The BJP is protesting against inflation, which it says is the result of the economic policies of the ruling Indian National Congress (Congress)-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA).

Thailand – Protests continue: While the situation in the capital on April 14 had reportedly calmed – partly because of festivities associated with the three-day Songkran (Thai New Year) celebrations celebrated on April 13 - 15 – UDD supporters reportedly to be moved towards Ratchaprasong Intersection, a commercial district of the capital. The capital remains under a state of emergency, which also applies to the provinces of Samut Prakan, Nonthaburi, Nakhon Pathom and Ayutthaya. Among other provisions, the measure bans public gatherings of more than five people. In addition, the Internal Security Act (ISA), which gives the security forces enhanced powers to tackle unrest, will also remain in in Bangkok, Nonthaburi province and Samut Prakan province until April 20. However, further clashes between protesters and the security forces can be expected in the absence of any compromise and as a result of aggressive posturing by either side. The Election Commission ruled that the Democrat Party (DP), which heads the ruling coalition, should be disbanded for failing to properly disclose campaign donations.

April 15

Bangladesh – Cyclone causes extensive destruction: At least 100 people have died in a powerful storm that hit areas on the border between India and Bangladesh. Many more are injured or trapped in rubble as about 50,000 houses were hit by winds of up to 160 km/h (100mph). Medical and food supplies have been rushed to the area after the cyclone struck overnight on Tuesday. North-eastern areas of West Bengal and Bihar states and the Bangladeshi state of Rangpur were worst-hit, said officials. West Bengal's Uttar Dinajpur district was struck badly, with nearly 40 dead. The area is still without power.

Myanmar – Explosions at Water Festival: On Thursday, April 15, 2010, three or possibly four bombs exploded in Rangoon at or near one of the Water Festival pandols near Kan Daw Gyi Lake. Current reports indicate that two people may have been killed and at least sixteen people may have been injured.

Kyrgyzstan – President leaves country: Unconfirmed reports indicate that ousted President Kurmanbek Bakiev has left Kyrgyzstan to meet with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev. It is not known when he is planning to return. The reports come after a clash occurred between Bakiev's supporters and supporters of the interim government at a pro-Bakiev rally in the southern city of Osh on April 15. Reports indicate that Bakiev was driven back to his home village of Teit following the incident. Protests are likely to continue until the dispute between Bakiev and the interim government is resolved.

Australia – Kunjin virus detected: The Department of Health urged people living and holidaying in the north of Western Australia to take extra care against mosquito bites, following detection of the mosquito-borne Kunjin virus for the first time this wet season. Infection with Kunjin virus can cause symptoms that are similar to Ross River virus disease, such as swollen and aching joints, fever and rash. However, in rare case, it can cause more severe symptoms, including headache, neck stiffness, fever, delirium and coma.

April 17

Pakistan – Bhutto report released: On April 17 a United Nations special commission released a much-anticipated report on the December 2007 assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in Rawalpindi. The report cites the failure of the Pakistani government, then controlled by President-General Pervez Musharraf, and Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) to take adequate steps to ensure Bhutto's security given the threats against her life. The report controversially asserts that Pakistan's powerful Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Rawalpindi police deliberately failed to investigate the assassination; police officers hosed down the crime scene less than two hours after the attack and prevented an autopsy from taking place prior to Bhutto's burial. The report does not indicate what group was responsible for the attack or the precise cause of Bhutto's death. The report's highly controversial findings have the potential to prompt protests in major Pakistani cities in the coming days.

April 18

India – Bombing in Bangalore: A bomb has exploded outside a cricket stadium in the southern Indian city of Bangalore, police say. At least eight people were injured in the explosion. The blast happened shortly before the start of an Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket match. Police say the device was hidden in the perimeter wall. The match went ahead with about 40,000 people in Chinnaswamy Stadium. The Mumbai Indians beat the Royal Challengers Bangalore. Extra security precautions have been implemented at the stadium for future matches.

Papua New Guinea – Earthquake strikes New Britain: A 6.3-magnitude earthquake has struck off Papua New Guinea but no tsunami alert has been issued and there are no early reports of casualties. The US Geological Survey said it had hit at about 0915 local time (2315 GMT) and was centred about 29km (18m) east of the Pacific state's city of Lae.

April 19

Australia -- MVE case in Northern Territory: The first possible case this year of the potentially fatal mosquito-borne disease Murray Valley Encephalitis has been reported. The affected person recently travelled around the Northern Territory, including Alice Springs and Top End areas. There were two cases of Murray Valley encephalitis, or MVE, in the Territory last year and both were fatal. The health department is warning people to take precautions in areas where there are mosquitoes. The symptoms of MVE include severe headache, high fever, drowsiness, and seizures, especially in young children. Despite treatment, 25 percent of people die from the infection and at least 25 per cent will have residual neurological effects. Some MVE activity has recently been found in sentinel chickens in Tennant Creek, Jabiru, and Nathan River.

Africa

April 13

Comoros Islands – Increased tension: Interior Minister Hassane Ahmed el Barwane warned the opposition to not provoke the local population during possible demonstrations in protest at the government's decision to extend President Ahmed Abdallah Sambi's term in office by 18 months; the president's term is scheduled to end on 26 May. Meanwhile, hundreds of people also clashed with the security forces during a demonstration in the central area of Fomboni, the capital of the island of Mohéli. The authorities have deployed additional troops to the area to control further unrest.

Côte d'Ivoire – Public transport strike: The transport union Coordination Nationale des Gares Routières de Côte d'Ivoire (CNGR-CI) commenced an indefinite nationwide public transport strike to demand a reduction in fuel prices. Significant travel disruption was reported in all major cities, including the capital Yamoussoukro, the southern port city of Abidjan (Lagunes region) and the cities of Daloa (Haut-Sassandra region), Grand-Bassam (Ébrié region) and Abengourou (Moyen-Comoé region). The disruption is reported to have been particularly significant in Abidjan, as a large number of bus, taxi and minibus (commonly known as Gbaka) drivers observed the industrial action.

La Reunion – Chikungunya cases: About twenty cases of chikungunya 19 likely confirmed and four were noticed these last weeks on the municipality of Saint Paul, in the West of the Island of Reunion, as well as several suspect cases.

Madagascar – Army issues deadline: Army chief Gen André Ndriarijoana demanded that President Andry Rajoelina provide a solution to the country's continuing political crisis before the end of the month. However, he refrained from specifying what action would be taken if Rajoelina failed to meet the deadline. The imposition of a deadline for tangible action may increase political tensions and the associated prospects for violence, particularly in the capital Antananarivo, in the coming weeks. The approach of parliamentary and legislative polls, currently scheduled for May, can also be expected to add to the tensions, heightening the risk of further volatility in the country. Heightened security measures should be anticipated in Antananarivo, particularly in areas where further incidents of unrest and vandalism are likely, such as the vicinity of the presidential palace, government buildings, the Tana Waterfront, Lake Anosy, Jumbo Score, Democracy Square Park, the vicinity of the railway station and Place du 13 Mai, a popular protest venue. Street demonstrations in support of the government could also be organized by ruling party activists in the days ahead. The security forces are not likely to disperse pro-government rallies, but any opposition protests would entail a potential for clashes with participants, which may pose indirect risks to people in the vicinity.

April 13

Nigeria – Kidnapping in Niger Delta: Unidentified gunmen allegedly abducted four expatriate workers (three Syrians and one Lebanese national) employed by an engineering company in Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers state. The kidnap highlights the ongoing risks associated with travel to the Niger delta region, where expatriates and business travelers continue to face direct and indirect risks arising from the activities of militant and criminal groups.

April 14

Gabon – Oil workers strike: The country's main oil workers' union has begun a strike which is seen as a big test for new President Ali Ben Bongo. The strike has brought public transport in the capital Libreville to a standstill and could lead to significant cuts in oil production. The unions are unhappy at labour regulations and want restrictions on the use of foreign workers. The strike would affect all sectors using fuel, including the national energy and water companies, but not hospitals and the security services. The strike could prompt spontaneous and potentially violent demonstrations in the coming days, including at petrol and diesel stations. The striking workers may also hold rallies to highlight their demands, especially in the capital Libreville and the coastal city of Port Gentil (Ogooue-Maritime province).

South Africa – Rift Valley fever: At least 24 new cases of Rift Valley Fever have been reported to the National Institute for Communicable Disease in less than a week, and three more people have died. No cases have been reported in the Western Cape.

April 16

South Africa – Municipal strike continues: Approximately 40,000-50,000 South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU) members are participating in marches in Johannesburg and Durban. Marches and demonstrations are expected to continue and have already caused massive disruptions in major cities throughout the country.

H5N1 - Avian Influenza Updates

Outbreak in birds: Wild ducks spread bird flu: Wild ducks that are immune to the effects of H5N1 avian influenza could be spreading the virus far and wide, U.S. government researchers said yesterday. Satellite tracking of migrating northern pintail ducks showed they flew from a bird flu-infected marsh in Japan to nesting areas in Russia, said the scientists from the US Geological Survey and the University of Tokyo said.

Human cases:

Vietnam: Two people in northern Vietnam have been infected with the H5N1 avian flu virus and health authorities are carrying out tests to see if 11 others who have come down with fever have been infected. The 2 who tested positive as well as the 11 suspected cases are all residents in the same commune in Bac Kan province. Disease clusters are a special concern because it may mean the agent in this case, the avian influenza A(H5N1) virus, is gaining the ability to jump from person to person.

Special – A/H1N1 - Swine Flu – Updates

The World Health Organization (WHO) - Pandemic (A/H1N1) update: As of 4 April 2010, worldwide more than 213 countries and overseas territories or communities have reported laboratory confirmed cases of pandemic influenza H1N1 2009, including over 17,700 deaths. The most active areas of pandemic influenza virus transmission continue to be in parts of Southeast Asia, West Africa, and in the tropical zone of the Americas. In Chile, a country of the southern hemisphere temperate zone, there is evidence of early localized pandemic influenza virus transmission in advance of the usual start of the southern hemisphere winter influenza season. Seasonal influenza type B viruses continue to actively circulate in East Asia, but are also being detected at low levels across other parts of Asia and Europe.



From Around the World

Update on European Flight Disruptions: Flight disruptions have continued throughout Europe and the United Kingdom for the fourth consecutive day since the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland erupted. Forecasters stated that the ash cloud produced by the volcano may be clearing, and European Union (EU) officials reported that 50 percent of the air traffic in Europe could resume by 19 April. Despite the positive outlook, airports in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom experienced closures and disruptions throughout the day on 18 April. Authorities in the U.K. extended flight bans, and at last report, airspace was scheduled to remain closed until at least 1800 on 19 April. In France, airports north of Nice and Bordeaux are to remain closed until at least the morning of 20 April, while the Bordeaux, Marseille, Nice and Toulouse airports remain open. Germany temporarily opened Berlin's Tegel (EDDT/TXL) and Schoenefeld (EDDB/SXF) airports; however, they were expected to close again at 2200 UTC on 18 April. Other international airports in the country are to remain closed until at least 1200 UTC on 19 April. Italy expects to reopen airspace in the northern part of the country at 1500 local time on 19 April. Six airports in Poland, including Warsaw's Frederic Chopin Airport (EPWA/WAW), and 17 airports in Spain reopened on 18 April. Despite the easing of airspace restrictions in several locations, many airlines, including British Airways, Brussels Airlines, Ryanair and Irish Aer Lingus, continue to halt flights at least until 19 April. Airline officials are currently pressuring European aviation authorities to reevaluate the flight bans across the continent after British Airways, Air France, KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, Air Berlin and Lufthansa completed test flights through the ash cloud at normal altitudes without incident, prompting a review on the 19. Travelers in the affected areas struggled to find flights and/or ground transportation; however, most available flights, rail and bus services are completely booked. Officials continue to work to develop alternate means of travel for stranded passengers. Travelers in the region should note that even when flights do resume, delays are likely to continue for several days as airlines accommodate the backlog of passengers affected by the suspension of flights. Commercial flight passengers should contact their airline prior to traveling to the airport to check the status of the airport and the flight. Because normal flight operations are not likely to resume for several days, travelers should consider making alternate arrangements to travel by road or rail.

From Around the World

Marine microbes beat plastic pollution: Marine life could be protected from the lethal effects of plastic pollution, according to new research that has hailed coastal microbes as a potential clean-up solution. In the first DNA-based study to investigate how microbes interact with plastic waste on the seabed, researchers from Sheffield University and the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (Cefas), revealed that small fragments of polyethylene - a polymer commonly used for shopping bags - were rapidly colonized by certain species of bacteria. What is most interesting to the researchers is the way the bacteria congregated together to form a biofilm on the plastic surface. The team said that this could mean that marine bacteria have the potential to degrade plastics or plastic-associated pollutants. Many scientists have raised concerns about plastic waste, as its breakdown in the environment can take thousands of years. Over time the size of plastic fragments in the sea decreases as a result of exposure to natural forces. Tiny 'microplastics' of 5mm or less are particularly dangerous as they can absorb toxic chemicals that are transported to marine animals when ingested. Research leader Mark Osborn, a senior lecturer in the Department of Animal and Plant Sciences at Sheffield University, stated that 300 million tons of plastic are produced globally each year, with significant proportions reaching the marine environment. If marine microbes were deployed in areas of the sea littered with plastic waste, he continued, there is potential that these pollutants could be quickly degraded.

Spanish scientists discover a salmonella resistant to the antibiotics: A group of Spanish investigators has detected in the United Kingdom a form of salmonella that has a new mechanism of resistance to the antibiotics. The investigators, belonging to the Complutensian University of Madrid and directed by the professor Bruno Gonzalez-Zorn, in collaboration with the Agency of Health of London, have discovered the salmonella strain that is resistant to antibiotics. The Complutensian University has emphasized that the work, published this month in the official magazine of the Center of Control of Diseases of The United States, has indicated that the disclosed the mechanism as RmtC (metiltransferasa of the ribosoma).

Travel Safety - Mexico

A report on the effects of Cartel violence on traveler safety in Mexico: The war between large illicit narcotics operations in Mexico has raged on and off for over a decade and claimed over 16,000 lives since 2006 alone. While the horrendous violence has destroyed the poorer regions of Mexico's northern states, the actions of the drug Cartels rarely, if ever endangered the lives of travelers. In fact, drug trafficking brings in an estimated 40bn US dollars a year, compared to the Mexican tourism industry, which attracts nearly 13bn annually. This profitable situation has created in Mexico a situation where the actions of these dangerous organizations is permitted by many levels of local government as long as they do not disturb other aspects of Mexico's relatively fragile economy, the corner stones of which include cheap manufacturing and tourism. Indeed, after over a decade of fighting, international tourism to Mexico increased every year until the outbreak of the Swine Flu epidemic in 2009. However, as WTP began to discuss in last week's issue, several major developments over the past two weeks have indicated a change in the rules of engagement by the major Mexican drug cartels. Such incidents include the bombing of the US embassy in Reynosa, the shooting of a US prison guard in Monterray, the hijacking and erecting of roadblocks throughout northeastern Mexico, such as the cities of Reynosa and Monterray as well as the increasing violence on the main tourist strip in the town of Acapulco. Why has this behaviour started and is it likely to abate or increase in intensity? Before these questions can be answered three key events have occurred within the cartel underworld that must be explained.

Travel Safety – Mexico – Continued:

The Mexican drug war is actually four major (and many minor) separate conflicts. Possibly the bloodiest dispute involves the invasion of Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua State, by the Sinaloa Cartel in the center of the US-Mexico border region, home of the Carillo Fuentes Organization or Juarez Cartel. The second and oldest dispute involves the Sinaloa Cartel's invasion of the pacific border region and the city of Tijuana, which is home to the remnants of the Arrillano Felix Organization (Tijuana Cartel). The third cartel conflict is actually an internal war between the Gulf Cartel and its one-time enforcer unit and former Mexican special forces paratroopers, Los Zetas, along the Gulf coast, particularly in Reynosa and Monterray. The final dispute involves another civil war amongst two rival factions of the Beltran Leyva Organization (BLO), once a part of the Sinaloa Cartel. As is plainly obvious, the cartel wars are centered around key border access points to the United States, the World's number one drug consumer (refer to map). Until this point these wars had been waged incessantly, with no sign of stopping. In fact, local street gangs in the US had begun exporting the violence to that country as well. Street gangs such as the Barrio Aztecas, Los Artists and the Mexicales have each aligned with different cartel organizations and have continued their violent competition for drug profits in all south-western American states. Now however, several recent events have indicated a change is now coming to the conflict. According to Stratfor Intelligence Services, Ciudad Juarez has finally been taken from the Juarez Cartel by the Sinaloa Cartel; as WTP reported last week, truckloads of armed gunmen were seen moving through towns throughout the region. If true, such a situation could mean an end to the violence that has claimed over 5,000 in the city. In Acapulco the rival factions of the BLO as well as gunmen from La Familia and the Sinaloa Cartel have begun dropping severed heads along Acapulco's beach strip. The latest public violence occurred on April 12 and included the death of an 8 year-old girl who was caught in a gunfight. It is now hoped that the capture of several of the leadership figures in the BLO organization will bring peace to the region. Possibly the most significant development for travelers is the alleged forging of an alliance between the Gulf, Sinaloa and La Familia Cartels – the three most powerful crime groups in Mexico – in order to crush Los Zetas, the former enforcers of the Gulf Cartel. According to the associated press, a recently captured Juarez Cartel hitman stated that the Juarez Cartel and Los Zetas had joined in an alliance of desperation in order to stave off defeat. "It's an issue of a common enemy," said Will Glaspy, head of the DEA office in the border town of McAllen, Texas. Banners began appearing in Tamaulipas earlier this year announcing the campaign by "the cartels of Mexico united against the Zetas". The assassin also stated that the new alliance, termed the "federation" is being supported by the Mexican federal government, which allegedly sees the arrangement as the easiest way to stop the violence. Reports of collusion between Joaquin "el Chapo" Guzman's Sinaloa Cartel and the Mexican government is well documented, although not completely proven. What makes this alliance important to travelers to Mexico is that the Juarez-Los Zetas faction, in a bid to apparently bring in the US as a neutral arbitrator, have begun attacking American targets. These include the assassinations of a US embassy employee in Reynosa and a Texas prison guard as well as the grenade attack on the American embassy in Reynosa last month. The groups have also begun regularly hijacking trucks and parking them across local freeways in Tamaulipas state. Such actions have also begun to seriously alter the attendance of workers at local maquiladoras, (manufacturing factories), whoa are too afraid to go to work. Such actions are causing international businesses to question whether it is worth it to continue to invest in Mexico's border region.

Travel Safety – Mexico – Continued:

Mexican drug cartels' main areas of influence



The campaign to bring the US in to mediate an end to the drug war will not succeed as it a politically impossible agenda for both the Obama administration in the US and the government of Felipe Calderon in Mexico. Yet this development in strategy reveals that the smaller organizations fighting in the central and eastern border zones are close to collapse. Once this event occurs the levels of violence will drop in these regions. It is also important to note that unlike the previous decade, tourism, cross-border trade and manufacturing are now being directly influenced by the actions of the Cartels. This situation will likely force further government crackdowns. These actions, coupled with the growing supremacy of one faction of the cartels over the other may mean that stability and relative peace may return to Mexico's border cities. However, such events are likely to unfold over the long-term, perhaps within the next year; over the next several weeks and months, as a balance of power is restored, violence, especially violence against travelers and other targets previously thought to be untouchable, will likely increase. The reason for this is because the remnants of the Juarez Cartel and Los Zetas, in their death throws, will continue their struggle through even more outrageous attacks. So while the situation improves for Mexico, travelers to the region must exercise extreme caution.

Visitors to northern Mexico must be prepared for spontaneous violence to occur at any time. Gun fights and hijackings occur frequently on highways. In the event of such violence occurring travelers should seek immediate cover and remain there until the fighting ceases. Such cover includes buildings and walls, not foliage or vehicles – bystanders and innocent victims are constantly being killed by the heavy weaponry deployed by the carters. Travelers who are driving in Mexico should constantly monitor the local media for any potential updates. Plan all driving routes in advance and ensure that a researched detour route has been prepared. Kidnappings also occur with alarming frequency. American citizens and other foreign nationals should not travel throughout Mexico's cities at night or make any obvious displays of wealth.

Our Environment

Australia - Reef could take 20 years to recover: The Chinese coal carrier that ran aground and leaked oil on to the Great Barrier Reef cut a scar the length of 10 city blocks into the shoal and may have smeared paint that will prevent marine life from growing back, the reef's chief scientist said. Even if severe toxic contamination is not found at the site, initial assessments indicate it could take 20 years to recover, said scientist David Wachenfeld. The Shen Neng 1 slammed into the shoal on April 3. It was lifted off the coral reef on Monday. Salvage crews later towed it to an anchorage area near Great Keppel Island.

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